

Polluted Pet Food

Commercial pet food and stock feed contain a cocktail of dead domestic animals and deadly environmental toxins.

Warning: these four short articles will make you rethink what you feed to your pets, and even what you and your family eat.

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1. THE TRUTH ABOUT CATS AND DOGS

by Ann Martin

The pet food industry, a billion-dollar, unregulated operation, feeds on the garbage that otherwise would wind up in landfills or be transformed into fertiliser. The hidden ingredients in a can of commercial pet food may include roadkill and the rendered remains of cats and dogs. The pet food industry claims that its products constitute a "complete and balanced diet" but, in reality, commercial pet food is unfit for human or animal consumption.

"Vegetable protein", the mainstay of dry dog foods, includes ground yellow corn, wheat shorts and middlings, soybean meal, rice husks, peanut meal and peanut shells (identified as "cellulose" on pet food labels). These often are little more than the sweepings from milling room floors. Stripped of their oil, germ and bran, these "proteins" are deficient in essential fatty acids, fat-soluble vitamins and antioxidants. "Animal protein" in commercial pet foods can include diseased meat, roadkill, contaminated material from slaughterhouses, faecal matter, rendered cats and dogs and poultry feathers. The major source of animal protein comes from dead-stock removal operations that supply so-called "4-D" animals—dead, diseased, dying or disabled—to "receiving plants" for hide, fat and meat removal. The meat (after being doused with charcoal and marked "unfit for human consumption") may then be sold for pet food.

Rendering plants process decomposing animal carcasses, large roadkill and euthanised dogs and cats into a dry protein product that is sold to the pet food industry. One small plant in Quebec, Ontario, renders 10 tons (22,000 pounds) of dogs and cats per week. The Quebec Ministry of Agriculture states that "the fur is not removed from dogs and cats" and that "dead animals are cooked together with viscera, bones and fat at 115° C (235° F) for 20 minutes".

The US Food and Drug Administration's Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) is aware of the use of rendered dogs and cats in pet foods, but has stated: "CVM has not acted to specifically prohibit the rendering of pets. However, that is not to say that the practise of using this material in pet food is condoned by the CVM."

In both the US and Canada, the pet food industry is virtually self-regulated. In the US, the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) sets guidelines and definitions for animal feed, including pet foods. In Canada, the most prominent control is the "Labeling Act", simply requiring product labels to state the name and address of the manufacturer, the weight of the product and whether it is dog or cat food. The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) and the Pet Food Association of Canada (PFAC) are voluntary organisations that, for the most part, rely on the integrity of the companies they certify to assure that product ingredients do not fall below minimum standards.

The majority—85 to 90 per cent—of the pet food sold in Canada is manufactured by US-based multinationals. Under the terms of the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement, neither the CVMA nor PFAC exercises any control over the ingredients in cans of US pet food.

Pet food industry advertising promotes the idea that, to keep pets healthy, one must feed them commercially formulated pet foods. But such a diet contributes to cancer, skin problems, allergies, hypertension, kidney and liver failure, heart disease and dental problems. One more item should be added to pet food labels: a skull-and-crossbones insignia!

(Ann Martin is an animal rights activist and leading critic of the commercial pet food industry. She lives in London, Ontario, Canada.)

2. FOOD NOT FIT FOR A PET

by Dr Wendell O. Belfield, D.V.M.

The most frequently asked question in my practice is, "Which commercial pet food do you recommend?" My standard answer is "None." I am certain that pet-owners notice changes in their animals after using different batches of the same brand of pet food. Their pets may have diarrhoea, increased flatulence, a dull hair coat, intermittent vomiting or prolonged scratching. These are common symptoms associated with commercial pet foods.

In 1981, as Martin Zucker and I wrote *How to Have a Healthier Dog*, we discovered the full extent of negative effects that commercial pet food has on animals. In February 1990, *San Francisco Chronicle* staff writer John Eckhouse went even further with an exposé entitled "How Dogs and Cats Get Recycled into Pet Food".

Eckhouse wrote: "Each year, millions of dead American dogs and cats are processed along with billions of pounds of other animal materials by companies known as renderers. The finished product...tallow and meat meal...serve as raw materials for thousands of items that include cosmetics and pet food."

Pet food company executives made the usual denials. But federal and state agencies, including the Food and Drug Administration, and medical groups, such as the American Veterinary Medical Association and the California Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA), confirm that pets, on a routine basis, are rendered after they die in animal shelters or are disposed of by health authorities—and the end product frequently finds its way into pet food.

Government health officials, scientists and pet food executives

argue that such open criticism of commercial pet food is unfounded. James Morris, a professor at the School of Veterinary Medicine at Davis, California, has said, "Any products not fit for human consumption are very well sterilised, so nothing can be transmitted to the animal." Individuals who make such statements know nothing of the meat and rendering business.

For seven years I was a veterinary meat inspector for the US Department of Agriculture and the State of California. I waded through blood, water, pus and faecal material, inhaled the fetid stench from the killing floor and listened to the death cries of slaughtered animals.

Prior to World War II, most slaughterhouses were all-inclusive; that is, livestock was slaughtered and processed in one location. There was a section for smoking meats, a section for processing meats into sausages, and a section for rendering. After World War II, the meat industry became more specialised. A slaughterhouse dressed the carcasses, while a separate facility made the sausages. The rendering of slaughter waste also became a separate speciality—no longer within the jurisdiction of federal meat inspectors and out of the public eye.

To prevent condemned meat from being rerouted and used for human consumption, government regulations require that meat be "denatured" before removal from the slaughterhouse and shipment to rendering facilities. In my time as a veterinary meat inspector, we denatured with carbolic acid (a potentially corrosive disinfectant) and/or creosote (used for wood-preservation or as a disinfectant). Both substances are highly toxic. According to federal meat inspection regulations, fuel oil, kerosene, crude carbolic acid and citronella (an insect repellent made from lemon grass) are all approved denaturing materials.

3. A LOOK INSIDE A RENDERING PLANT

by Gar Smith

Rendering has been called "the silent industry". Each year in the US, 286 rendering plants quietly dispose of more than 12.5 million tons of dead animals, fat and meat wastes. As the public relations watchdog newsletter *PR Watch* observes, renderers "are thankful that most people remain blissfully unaware of their existence".

When *City Paper* reporter Van Smith visited Baltimore's Valley Proteins rendering plant last summer, he found that the "hoggers" (the large vats used to grind and filter animal tissues prior to deep-fat-frying) held an eclectic mix of body parts ranging from "dead dogs, cats, raccoons, possums, deer, foxes [and] snakes" to a "baby circus elephant" and the remains of Bozeman, a Police Department quarter-horse that "died in the line of duty".

In an average month, Baltimore's pound hands over 1,824 dead animals to Valley Proteins. Last year, the plant transformed 150 millions pounds of decaying flesh and kitchen grease into 80 million pounds of commercial meat and bone meal, tallow and yellow grease. Thirty years ago, most

of the renderer's wastes came from small markets and slaughterhouses. Today, thanks to the proliferation of fast-food restaurants, nearly half the raw material is kitchen grease and frying oil.

Recycling dead pets and wildlife into animal food is "a very small part of the business that we don't like to advertise," Valley Proteins' President, J. J. Smith, told *City Paper*. The plant processes these animals as a "public service, not for profit," Smith said, since "there is not a lot of protein and fat [on pets]...., just a lot of hair you have to deal with somehow."

According to *City Paper*, Valley Proteins "sells inedible animal parts and rendered material to Alpo, Heinz and Ralston-Purina". Valley Proteins insists that it does not sell "dead pet by-products" to pet food firms since "they are all very sensitive to the recycled pet potential". Valley Proteins maintains two production lines—one for clean meat and bones and a second line for dead pets and wildlife. However, Van Smith reported, "the protein material is a mix from both production lines. Thus the meat and bone meal made at the plant includes materials from pets and wildlife, and about five per cent of that product goes to dry-pet-food manufacturers..."

A 1991 USDA report states that "approximately 7.9 billion pounds of meat and bone meal, blood meal and feather meal [were] produced in 1983". Of that amount, 34 per cent was used in pet food, 34 per cent in poultry feed, 20 per cent in pig food and 10 per cent in beef and dairy cattle feed.

Transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) carried in pig- and chicken-laden foods may eventually eclipse the threat of "mad cow disease". The risk of household pet exposure to TSE from contaminated pet food is more than three times greater than the risk for hamburger-eating humans.

(Gar Smith is Editor of *Earth Island Journal*.)



Barrels filled with euthanised dogs and cats await transfer to a Baltimore rendering plant. (Photo credit: Michelle Gienow, *City Paper*)

Condemned livestock carcasses treated with these chemicals can become meat and bone meal for the pet food industry. Because rendering facilities are not government-controlled, any animal carcasses can be rendered—even dogs and cats. As Eileen Layne of the CVMA told the *Chronicle*, "When you read pet food labels, and it says "meat and bone meal", that's what it is: cooked and converted animals, including some dogs and cats."

Some of these dead pets—those euthanised by veterinarians—already contain pentobarbital before treatment with the denaturing process. According to University of Minnesota researchers, the sodium pentobarbital used to euthanise pets "survives rendering without undergoing degradation". Fat stabilisers are introduced into the finished rendered product to prevent rancidity. Common chemical stabilisers include BHA (butylated hydroxyanisole) and BHT (butylated hydroxytoluene)—both known to cause liver and kidney dysfunction—and ethoxyquin, a suspected carcinogen. Many semi-moist dog foods contain propylene glycol—first cousin to the anti-freeze agent, ethylene glycol, that destroys red blood-cells. Lead frequently shows up in pet foods, even those made from livestock meat and bone meal. A Massachusetts Institute of Technology study, titled "Lead in Animal Foods", found that a nine-pound cat fed on commercial pet food ingests more lead than the amount considered potentially toxic for children.

I have been practising small-animal medicine for more than 25 years. Every day I see the casualties of pet industry propaganda. But the professors in the teaching institutions of veterinary medicine generally support an industry that has little regard for the quality of health in our companion animals.

One last word of caution: meat and bone meal from sources not fit for human consumption have found their way into poultry feed. This means that animal products rendered under questionable conditions are fed to birds that may wind up on your table. Remember this when you are eating your next piece of chicken or turkey.

(Dr Belfield is a graduate of Tuskegee Institute of Veterinary Medicine and is now in private practice in San Jose, California. Dr Belfield established the first orthomolecular veterinary hospital in the US. He is co-author of *The Very Healthy Cat Book* and *How to Have a Healthier Dog*. This article first appeared in *Let's Live Magazine*, May 1992.)



Photo credit: Eban Fleaux

4. THE DARK SIDE OF RECYCLING

[Author's name withheld]

[In February 1990, the San Francisco Chronicle carried a macabre two-part story detailing how stray dogs, cats and pound animals are routinely rounded up by meat renderers and ground up into—of all things—pet food. According to the researcher who brought the information to the Chronicle, the paper buried the story and deleted many of the charges he had documented. A report he worked on for ABC television's 20-20 was similarly watered down. In exasperation, he sent the story to Earth Island Journal. NEXUS has been asked to withhold the name of the author/researcher, who has been forced to flee San Francisco with his wife and go into hiding as a result of the threats made against his well-being. Ed.]

The rendering plant floor is piled high with "raw product": thousands of dead dogs and cats; heads and hooves from cattle, sheep, pigs and horses; whole skunks; rats and raccoons—all waiting to be processed. In the 90-degree heat, the piles of dead animals seem to have a life of their own as millions of maggots swarm over the carcasses.

Two bandana-masked men begin operating Bobcat mini-dozers, loading the "raw" into a 10-foot-deep stainless-steel pit. They are undocumented workers from Mexico, doing a dirty job. A giant auger-grinder at the bottom of the pit begins to turn. Popping bones and squeezing flesh are sounds from a nightmare you will never forget.

Rendering is the process of cooking raw animal material to remove the moisture and fat. The rendering plant works like a giant kitchen. The cooker, or "chef", blends the raw product in order to maintain a certain ratio between the carcasses of pets,

livestock, poultry waste and supermarket rejects.

Once the mass is cut into small pieces, it is transported to another auger for fine shredding. It is then cooked at 280 degrees for one hour. The continuous batch cooking process goes on non-stop, 24 hours a day, seven days a week as meat is melted away from bones in the hot 'soup'. During this cooking process, the 'soup' produces a fat of yellow grease or tallow that rises to the top and is skimmed off. The cooked meat and bone are sent to a hammermill press, which squeezes out the remaining moisture and pulverises the product into a gritty powder. Shaker screens sift out excess hair and large bone chips. Once the batch is finished, all that is left is yellow grease, meat and bone meal.

A Meaty Menu

As the *American Journal of Veterinary Research* explains, this recycled meat and bone meal is used as "a source of protein and other nutrients in the diets of poultry and swine and in pet foods, with lesser amounts used in the feed of cattle and sheep. Animal fat is also used in animal feeds as an energy source." Every day, hundreds of rendering plants across the United States truck millions of tons of this "food enhancer" to poultry ranches, cattle feed-lots, dairy and hog farms, fish-feed plants and pet-food manufacturers where it is mixed with other ingredients to feed the billions of animals that meat-eating humans, in turn, will eat.

NOTICE — All Animals Are To Be Destroyed In A Humane Manner and No Processing Is To Begin Until The Animal Has Expired.

— The Management

[Sign on the wall of a rendering plant]

Rendering plants have different specialities. The labelling designation of a particular "run" of product is defined by the predominance of a specific animal. Some product-label names are: meat meal, meat by-products, poultry meal, poultry by-products, fish meal, fish oil, yellow grease, tallow, beef fat and chicken fat.

Rendering plants perform one of the most valuable functions on Earth: they recycle used animals. Without rendering, our cities would run the risk of becoming filled with diseased and rotting carcasses. Fatal viruses and bacteria would spread uncontrolled through the population.

The Dark Side

Death is the number one commodity in a business where the demand for feed ingredients far exceeds the supply of raw product. But this elaborate system of food production through waste management has evolved into a recycling nightmare. Rendering plants are unavoidably processing toxic waste.

The dead animals (the "raw") are accompanied by a whole menu of unwanted ingredients. Pesticides enter the rendering process via poisoned livestock, and fish oil laced with bootleg DDT and other organophosphates that have accumulated in the bodies of West Coast mackerel and tuna.

Because animals are frequently shoved into the pit with flea collars still attached, organophosphate-containing insecticides get into the mix as well. The insecticide Dursban arrives in the form of cattle insecticide patches. Pharmaceuticals leak from antibiotics in livestock, and euthanasia drugs given to pets are also included. Heavy metals accumulate from a variety of sources: pet ID tags, surgical pins and needles.

Even plastic winds up going into the pit. Unsold supermarket meats, chicken and fish arrive in styrofoam trays and shrink wrap. No one has time for the tedious chore of unwrapping thousands of rejected meat-packs. More plastic is added to the pits with the arrival of cattle ID tags, plastic insecticide patches and the green plastic bags containing pets from veterinarians.

Rendering Judgements

Skyrocketing labour costs are one of the economic factors forcing the corporate flesh-peddlers to cheat. It is far too costly for plant personnel to cut off flea collars or unwrap spoiled T-bone steaks. Every week, millions of packages of plastic-wrapped meat go through the rendering process and become one of the unwanted ingredients in animal feed.

The most environmentally conscious state in the nation is California, where spot checks and testing of animal-feed ingredients happen at the wobbly rate of once every two-and-a-half months. The supervising state agency is the Department of Agriculture's Feed and Fertilizer Division of Compliance. Its main objective is to test for truth in labelling: does the percentage of protein, phosphorous and calcium match the rendering plant's claims; do the percentages meet state requirements? However, testing for pesticides and other toxins in animal feeds is incomplete.

In California, eight field inspectors regulate a rendering industry that feeds the animals that the state's 30 million people eat. When it comes to rendering plants, however, state and federal agencies have maintained a hands-off policy, allowing the industry to become largely self-regulating. An article in the February

1990 issue of *Render*, the industry's national magazine, suggests that the self-regulation of certain contamination problems is not working.

One policing program that is already off to a shaky start is the Salmonella Education/Reduction Program, formed under the auspices of the National Renderers Association. The magazine states that "...unless US and Canadian renderers get their heads out of the ground and demonstrate that they are serious about reducing the incidence of salmonella contamination in their animal protein meals, they are going to be faced with...new and overly stringent government regulations."

So far, the voluntary self-testing program is not working. According to the magazine, "...only about 20 per cent of the total number of companies producing or blending animal protein meal have signed up for the program..." Far fewer have done the actual testing.

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The *American Journal of Veterinary Research* conducted an investigation into the persistence of sodium phenobarbital in the carcasses of euthanised animals at a typical rendering plant in 1985 and found "...virtually no degradation of the drug occurred during this conventional rendering process..." and that "...the potential of other chemical contaminants (e.g., heavy metals, pesticides and environmental toxicants, which may cause massive herd mortalities) to degrade during conventional rendering needs further evaluation."

Renderers are the silent partners in our food chain. But worried insiders are beginning to talk, and one word that continues to come up in conversation is "pesticides". The possibility of petrochemically poisoning our food has become a reality. Government agencies and the industry itself are allowing toxins to be inadvertently recycled from the streets and supermarket shelves into the food chain. As we break into a new decade of increasingly complex pollution problems, we must rethink our place in the environment. No longer hunters, we are becoming the victims of our technologically altered food chain.

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